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Alice: We've been exploring various ways that we come alongside people who are suffering or experiencing pain in one or another area of their lives, and we've talked about some of the important interventions that we can have: the intervention of listening very carefully; the intervention of helping a person to change his or her thinking; the intervention of helping a person to know when to change merely their thinking but more than that the circumstances that are causing the stress and the distress in their lives. We've talked about forgiveness and the way in which a person develops resiliency in order to cope with the stresses of life. But there's one more intervention that we can't leave out and that is the intervention of prayer.

You and I as followers of Jesus Christ have the possibility of standing between this person and his or her pain and God as we intercede for that person. Now, Karen, when I use the word *intercede* what am I talking about?

Karen: Well, I was just going to ask you: We hear a lot about the word *intercessory* prayer, and what do we mean by that?

Alice: Well, *inter*, of course, means in between, and we are coming in between that person in pain and God in some way. We are coming to God asking for insight so that we know how we can come alongside this person. We are asking God to work in this person's mind and in this person's heart that the person will understand why it's important to have a changed mind or why it's important to change a circumstance that is in the person's life. Why it's important to develop resiliency. Why it's important to forgive. So we are praying for that person.

We are interceding for that person. And when we talk about intercessory prayer, we go back to the Scriptures and we look at examples of people who interceded for someone else. And I'm thinking of Abraham when his nephew Lot was living in the city

of Sodom, which was a wicked city, and God said, “I am going to destroy that city.” Now Abraham became the in between person. Abraham became the intercessor. You remember the story, Karen, what was going on?

Karen: Absolutely, and he talked with God about how many people need to be in Sodom who are righteous. How many people need to be righteous for you to save the city? [See Genesis 18.]

Alice: Yes, that’s exactly what he was doing. But what is very interesting as you look at Abraham interceding for Sodom, Abraham didn’t have any chips. Abraham couldn’t bargain with God. He was just simply trying to understand what God was about in doing this to the city of Sodom. And we hear him doing what sounds like bargaining, but it wasn’t really bargaining because if you’re bargaining, you’ve got some chips.

Karen: You’ve got money.

Alice: You’ve got money. You’ve got something going, and Abraham didn’t have that, but what he had was an idea of God; an idea that had brought him from the land of Ur across hundreds and hundreds of miles to this new land in Palestine. And we find Abraham now having his idea of whom God is being challenged by this situation in Sodom. And he said, “What’s going on here, God? Will the judge of all the earth not do right?” And it was on the basis of God’s character that Abraham was pleading for the city. He isn’t bargaining with God, but he had built his life on the belief that God was just and God was fair and God would do the right thing. And I think very often in our lives we want to go on thinking that God will just do the things that we want for our own reasons without recognizing that God has larger purposes that He is carrying out in the world. And when I’m interceding for someone, I’m not bargaining with God. I don’t have any chips. I’m trying to understand why God is permitting this person to go through this difficult situation, and I am trying to see what God might be able to do, what God might do through this person’s pain.

But there are issues in intercessory prayer that we probably need to talk about, because when I pray there are some things that I know and there are some things I don’t know and for which I just simply have to trust. For example, I know from Scripture that it is not God’s will that any should perish but that all should come to

repentance, so I can pray that someone will come to repentance and know that I am praying in God's will.

But there are other things that I don't know, and I have to know the difference between what is clear to me in Scripture and what I don't know but I have to trust God to do.

Karen: So intercessory prayer isn't forcing our will on God. It's not deciding what we want and putting chips in and hoping to get the bubble gum out of the machine.

Alice: Exactly, and I have often thought about that illustration: You know, you put your nickel in and out pops your bubble gum. And sometimes we treat prayer that way. We think: If I put my nickel's worth of prayer in here that God is obligated in some way to come through the way I have prayed. But really prayer is bringing my understanding in line with God's purposes, and in order to do that I must be thoroughly involved with what I know from Scripture is the character and the purpose of God.

Karen: I think we go back to Scripture as well and look at how often the phrase "Your will be done" shows up in Scripture, and I think it really helps us to understand what happens in prayer.

Alice: That's good.

Karen: And I'm thinking about all of the passages where we read that Jesus and the Holy Spirit and God Himself intercedes for us while we're praying even so that we can get a sense for what God's will is.

Alice: That's good, and that takes us back to Romans 8 where we find that the Spirit is actually interceding for us—and that's just a wonderful and comforting thought. But I also go to the Garden of Gethsemane, and I hear Jesus faced with the will of God that for our salvation He was to die. And as He is on His face in the garden that night praying, He is praying, "not My will be done but Your will," and it was that will of God, that bowing to the will of God, that gave Him the strength to go through all that He suffered on the cross on our behalf. And there are times when I can pray earnestly for someone who is going through great difficulty, great pain, but I can't dictate to God the terms for solving that problem. All I can do is commit this to God, not just in an offhanded way, saying, "Oh, if it's Your will," sort of a "que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be." No, not like that, but just a bowing to what God

may be doing in this situation that can change this person's life even as this person goes through pain.

It was Fosdick, in his book *The Meaning of Prayer*, that talked about three major ways in which we cooperate with God. And he said this: He said, "First we cooperate with God in our thinking as we're taught by Scripture to think God's thoughts after Him, and there's nothing more important than being thoroughly schooled in the Word of God so that we can understand who God is and think God's thoughts after Him." But he went on to say that we also cooperate with God in our praying as we're guided by the Holy Spirit to pray for the things that are in accordance with God's will. And as you were saying earlier, Karen, it's a wonderful comfort to know that the Holy Spirit is praying with us even as we pray, and I want to pray for what God wants, and not for just for what I think would be a good solution to a particular situation.

But Fosdick also goes on to say that we cooperate with God not just in our thinking guided by Scripture, not just in our praying guided by the Holy Spirit, but he said we cooperate with God in our activity and in our work as we do what we can to carry out God's program for this world. And this is the action piece that is there, and we have been talking about action pieces as we've been talking about interventions, the ways that we come alongside someone. We don't just pray for them. We do come alongside. We do act on their behalf by listening, by doing the other things that we have been talking about, recognizing that we can never substitute prayer for good thinking and work, just as we can never substitute good thinking and work for prayer. We need all three in our lives as we come along people in pain.

There's a wonderful story over in Exodus 14 that I find very challenging in my own life. It's the story of God's people who have just been delivered from slavery in Egypt. They have reached the Red Sea. They are still on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea, and they have heard that Pharaoh has changed his mind, and his soldiers are coming to take them back into slavery. And they begin to cry out to God, and God says to Moses, "Why are they crying out to me? Go forward. That's what they need to do. Go forward."

And we read in the text that Moses lifted his staff over the Red Sea. The waters parted and the people were able to go forward. Now when God said, "Go forward," there was nothing in their circumstances that looked as if that was possible. They had a sea in front of them, but God said it's time to move. It's time to do

something. Don't just stand there crying about it. Get busy. Get on the move. And what we find in that text is the reminder that our prayers don't substitute for the work that we have to do. If I'm interceding for the poor, I had better be willing to do what I can to make sure that they have food. If I am coming alongside someone in pain, and there's something that I can do for that person in addition to praying, I need to be doing that as well.

And it reminds me that intercessory prayer puts us standing between the Word of God on one side and the world on the other side. The Word tells me what God's will is for this world. The world shows me that it is out of sync with God's purpose. It actively resists God. And we stand between the two, and we do that through intercessory prayer.

There's a wonderful story over in Daniel 9 in which Daniel has been reading the letters of Jeremiah and in those letters he discovers that God has decreed 70 years of slavery in Babylonia and then in Persia for His people in exile, but that God would take them back to the land. So here he is in Persia. Darius the Mede has now come to the throne and the people are still enslaved, but the time is right to go back. And in Daniel chapter 9, we hear Daniel gripped now by what Jeremiah has said in the Word of God and living in the tension between what God has told him through Jeremiah's writing, and what he could see all around him. And this drove him to powerful intercession, and it's the same for us. We know what God wills for people. We look at the world around them, and we see all of the causes of their pain, and this should drive us to powerful intercession for them. We have to be realists about the world. We have to be realists about the Word and the tension between the Word and the world.

Now when Scripture and your experience clash, it's not the time to run from the tension. It's the time to be energized by that tension to pray. Daniel didn't try to ease the tension that he experienced. He grappled with it, and he was determined that the reality of the world had to conform to the reality of the Word. And so in chapter 9 verse 3, we find him giving his attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. Now that's serious prayer, and that's what Daniel was doing. Daniel was made bold by his vision of what God purposed over against what he saw in the world around him, and so we hear him praying. And he says, "O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name." [Daniel 9:19 NKJV]

God's reputation was at stake; and often what hinders us in our work is not understanding God's power in our lives. A. W. Tozer observed that what we think about God may be the most important thing about us, and it will determine the entire course of our lives.

So what difference does it make that we do this praying? Well, Daniel knew that the great God was powerful enough to take people out of exile back to the land, and we are called to that same kind of dialogue with God on the behalf of those God has brought into our lives, people who are experiencing pain and who we can help not just by coming alongside but by mounting an intercessory barrage of prayer on their behalf. God has purposed us to do this. He has empowered us to do this. He has given us the possibility of prayer, and this is perhaps the most important intervention of all.